

## ESTIMATING EDITING\*

by Laura E. Singer

On many jobs that I edit, the client asks, “How long will it take?” After several years’ experience, I developed a formula that takes into account three major points in calculating how long a job will take:

- *Complexity of the material*—A nontechnical article takes less time to edit than an article dealing with a very technical subject. A double-spaced manuscript takes less time than multicolumn page proofs that include illustrations, callouts, and cross-references.
- *Number of stages involved*—On some editing jobs you might see the copy at only one stage—usually, but not always, the manuscript. Other jobs might involve several stages, from the first draft through camera-ready copy.
- *Stability of the material (and the client)*—The stability of the material (and the client) is the most difficult to gauge, particularly if you’re working with that client for the first time. One general rule to follow is this: The amount of time a project will take is in direct proportion to the number of people who are required to approve the material and how often they will be reviewing the material.

Here’s the basic formula I use for estimating editing time:

$$\text{Time} = \left( \frac{\text{number of pages}}{5\text{--}10 \text{ pages/hour}} \times 1.5 \text{ read-throughs} \right) + 10\%\text{--}20\% \text{ “fudge factor”}$$

*Note:* If the client gives a range, say, 100–125 pages, always use the higher number. (It’s better to err on the side of overestimating; also, I’ve found that the higher number is usually more accurate.)

The complexity of the material determines what number within the range of 5–10 pages per hour to use for the second figure in the formula. If you have the opportunity to look at a sample before preparing the estimate, take the time to read through 3–5 typical pages as though you were doing an edit (a “mental” edit—don’t start actual editing until you know you have the job). Based on that sample, you can estimate how many pages per hour to use in the formula.

Ideally, I read through a job twice. The first read-through is slower and more painstaking; the second time through is faster, as I’m primarily checking for continuity and flow. (Some editors prefer the reverse, doing a fast read-through first, to get a feel for the material before getting down to the actual edit.) Because the second read-through is faster than the first, I use a factor of 1.5 to take this speed differential into account.

The 10%–20% I’ve labeled “fudge factor” covers reviewing the work with the client, telephone calls to track down wayward review copies, pick up and delivery, etc. Most of the time 10% is more than enough; however, if the client is particularly “flaky” or the product is still under development and therefore the documentation is potentially subject to numerous changes even while you’re working on it, use a higher number.

Let’s say the job involves 20–25 pages of double-spaced manuscript on a nontechnical subject, for example, an overview of employee training programs. Here’s how I’d calculate the job:

$$\left( \frac{25 \text{ pages}}{10 \text{ pages/hour}} = 2.5 \text{ hours} \right) \times 1.5 = 3.75 \text{ hours}$$

Round 3.75 hours upward  $\approx$  4 hours

4 hours + 10%  $\approx$  4.5 hours

If the job involves dealing with the same material at several stages, repeat the basic formula for each stage. Since familiarity with the material increases editing speed, use the 1.5 factor only for the first stage.

*Note:* When you present the estimate, verbally or in writing, spell out the specifications you used in your calculations. This gives you a “safety net” so that if the project changes radically, you can revise your estimate accordingly.

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